THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Therefore

April 11, 1999
John M. Buchanan

"It is always shocking to meet life where we thought we were alone.... An impersonal God - well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness inside our own heads - better still. A formless life - force surging through us, a vast-power which we can tap - best of all. But God, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at infinite speed - that is quite another matter.... There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found God? We never meant it to come to *that*? Worse still, supposing God found us? So it is a sort of Rubicon. One goes across; or not. But if one does, there is no manner of security against miracles."

C. S. Lewis
Miracles

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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THEREFORE

April 11, 1999

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

John 20: 19-29
I Corinthians 15:50-16:3

"Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord . . .Now concerning the collection for the saints. . ." (I Corinthians 15:58, 16: l)

Dear God, some of us are here because this is what we do every Sunday; some of us are here to think more about what happened a week ago. We know that every Sunday can't be Easter, but we also know that if what we sang about last week really happened, every day is different. So we come to hear the word you have for us. Startle us again with the newness of your love and open our hearts and minds to your truth and your goodness, and your eternal love, in Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

It's known as "Low Sunday," this Sunday after Easter. And it's not just numbers, although there will be a dramatic difference between the numbers of people who crowded into church sanctuaries last Sunday and the faithful who come back one week later. Everybody goes to church on Easter. It's a reasonable, market driven choice. It's a pretty good show. The music is glorious, the flowers are gorgeous, we even commissioned new banners for the occasion. And the preacher . . .well, the preacher senses that she/he has a one-time shot at a lot of folk who aren't ordinarily sitting out there. And even though the subject matter is daunting, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ turns the most articulate of us to stuttering and mumbling, there isn't a one of us who doesn't fantasize that we will be so compelling, so brilliant, that they'll all come back next week.

That's why we call it "Low Sunday". It's also why a fair percentage of us take this Sunday off. It's hard coming down off the mountain so abruptly. Now, to be sure, there is the exhaustion factor. Everyone gives it all we have in Holy Week. Everybody works overtime, staff and volunteers and members alike, so there is the reality of institutional exhaustion. But that's not the major reality. It's "Low Sunday" because there is a major gap between the high and exuberant celebration of Easter morning and the rest of the time. There is a theological gap between celebrating the resurrection and living a normal life.

It's there in the Bible. On the first day of the week after Jesus was crucified his friends are hiding in a locked room somewhere in Jerusalem. They have reason to be afraid. There's no guarantee that the same people who engineered Jesus' arrest and mock trial and execution won't now turn their attention to them, his followers, and once and for all put an end to this dangerous foolishness emanating from Galilee. So they're hiding and on the first day of the week, after Sabbath, a few of the women venture out to go to the tomb where Joseph of Arimathea has buried the body. And what happens next is holy,

wonderful confusion. The body is gone. The guards are asleep. The tomb is empty. There is a rumor of angels and Jesus appearing in the garden and on the road. And there is a lot of running back and forth, racing to the tomb and arriving breathlessly to see for themselves that what the women have said is true, then back to the locked room to tell the good news, the fantastic, incredible good news that he is alive, death did not hold him, love has prevailed, goodness and truth and justice are vindicated. Now the meek triumph; the humble are blessed, the peacemakers, the healers, the little people, the outsiders are now raised up as he is. And so that very day they burst out of that little room in an explosion of joy and devotion and evangelical fervor.

That's what the four gospels say happened—all but the last part. They didn't burst out of that room at all. In fact, one week after Easter they are still there, hiding in the room, wondering what to do next. Not much has happened all week apparently, because there's no mention of any activity. They must have sent out for food. Maybe they took walks at night. Surely they talked a lot about what happened. What else was there to do? But one week later they're still there. It was, that is to say, the very first Low Sunday. For them the issue is—now what? We've experienced the risen Lord. We know something we didn't know before. Now what? What should we do?

It is, of course, the issue before us today, one week after Easter

In fact, I like this Sunday. I have my own personal names for it: "When the rubber hits the road Sunday," "So What? Sunday". Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Now what?

The first person to think through the meaning of what happened on Easter morning and what it had to do with the rest of life was by St. Paul, our first missionary and our first theologian. Paul wrote a letter to the early Christian Church in the Greek city of Corinth, a little congregation of Christians in a sophisticated, lively urban center, a cosmopolitan seaport with a library and theater and a huge temple just outside town that employed a thousand sacred prostitutes.

What prompted the letter was a church fight. At least some things never change! Paul pleads for unity and in the process writes one of the most sublime essays on love anyone ever wrote. " . . .faith, hope and love abide. . . but the greatest of these is love."

And then at the end of the letter he turns to the resurrection. Scholars have devoted enormous attention to the 15th chapter of First Corinthians. It is carefully reasoned, scholarly, sometimes difficult. In it Paul, again, writes lyrically and gorgeously.

> "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile . . . But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died . . . as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ . . ."

I can't hear those words without hearing in my mind the glorious music to which George Frederick Handel set them in "Messiah," portions of which lifted our spirits last Sunday morning.

> "Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will

sound and the dead will be raised imperishable. Oh death, where is your victory. Oh death, where is your sting."

When Handel got to that part he wrote a duet, a delicate, lilting, almost playful duet, I've always thought--

O death, where is thy victory.

"Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

And the work closes with the longest and most majestic "Amen" anyone ever wrote. The music stops there, powerfully, gorgeously. But Paul goes on. . . "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord . . .Now concerning the collection for the saints."

Handel's "Messiah" is one of the most magnificent pieces of music ever written, but theologically there is a big mistake. Handel didn't go far enough. He dropped the "therefore" from his treatment of the resurrection. He forgot that Paul went from "O death where is thy victory" to raising some money for the poor Christians in Jerusalem without missing a beat.

This is not a serious critique of Handel. But it is a serious proposal that the resurrection of Jesus Christ remains an idea in the mind, an aesthetic reality best expressed in wonderful music, poetry and art, flowers, candy, new clothes. It is a serious proposal that we have become convinced, we Presbyterians particularly, that truth is something we know intellectually, faith is accepting a list of propositions as truth, belief in Jesus Christ is establishing and maintaining a creed, a confession of faith, a standard or boundary of orthodoxy, all of which simply overlooks the dynamic so central to Paul's thought, "Therefore . . . now about the collection." It's not just a theological assertion or an aesthetic experience. It's practice, behavior, life lived.

Theologian Alan Richardson wrote helpfully: "According to the Bible our knowledge of God is not like our knowledge of electrons or square roots: we know truth about God only by doing it, not by talking or reasoning about it, just as we know love only by loving. Truth in the Biblical sense is something to be practiced." (See Ian Pitt Watson, *The Folly of Preaching,* p. 36)

Dorothy Bass, of Valparaiso University, has produced a book, *Practicing our Faith,* a collection of essays by a group of scholars on what the Christian life looks like in the world . . . the practices that constitute Christian life, hospitality, forgiveness, generosity.

Her point is that the practice, the behavior, the "therefore" factor, are as much a part of Christian faith as our theology. . . and that sometimes you can practice the faith even when you're having a little trouble with it intellectually.

There are, I learned this week, 1,035 "therefores" in the Bible. Someone said, only partially in jest, that the most important word in the Bible is "therefore." Biblical faith from beginning to end is a synthesis of mind, heart and body: ideas and concepts and propositions, and the devotion of the heart in prayer and meditation and personal

spirituality, and practice, the life lived, the action taken, as some put it so eloquently "walkin' the walk not just talkin' the talk."

"Now, about the collection" Paul wrote after his glorious resurrection homily. The Christians in Jerusalem had fallen on hard times. The Christian church from its inception had been characterized by the public demonstration of concern and compassion for the needy, its care and shelter of the marginalized and its inclusion of the outcasts. Christians startled the world of the first century by picking up abandoned babies and caring for them and by providing for orphans and widows. It was the truth of their thinking and also the truth of their being that conveyed the good news of the Gospel. And now the church in Jerusalem was in trouble and Paul is fund raising in Greek cities, hundreds of miles away to help people the Corinthian Christians didn't know and ordinarily would not have cared about. It is a remarkable development actually, maybe the first time in history anything like that happened.

What a coincidence, or perhaps, more accurately, a providential convergence, that on the day we are thinking about the "therefore" dimension of faith and Paul's fund raising following so closely on the heels of his magnificent resurrection homily, that we, the Sunday after Easter, are fund raising for brothers and sisters, refugees in Kosovo, our own version of the collection for the saints.

What is happening in Kosovo is unspeakable. Whether the NATO bombing will reverse it or resolve it or worsen it is for governments and military planners to sort out. How it will end ultimately is a matter of great importance for everyone who cares about justice and peace. But in the meantime, the need is beyond our imagination.

You read, as I did last week, about masked paramilitary men in Kosovo, driving Osman Azemia, his wife and their children from their home, herding them on a train for a 36 hour trip to the Macedonian border, then forcing them to remain for 4 days and nights in an open field with no sanitary facilities, looking for food and water, fighting for a piece of dry ground to sit down. 350,000 Albanians have been forced out of Kosovo.

We have an opportunity today to respond, to give behavioral expression to the truth we celebrated in music and flowers and sermons a week ago. There is, for us, an immediate "therefore" factor. And there are deeper issues, as well.

Beyond the logistics of fund raising and delivering food and shelter to refugees there is a word that desperately needs to be said in the world today and in our nation and in our city and in our churches. It is a resurrection word. It is that because God's love in Jesus Christ was not defeated by death. We now know something new, namely that all of us are children of God and therefore brothers and sisters. There are no expendable people: Albanian refugees or a little child in Cabrini Green. Nothing about us—race, ethnicity, skin color, economic status, sexual orientation, excludes us from the human community, from the church, because in Christ we know that all are included in God's inclusive love. Each is precious. Each is to receive respect and love and justice and inclusion because of Christ's resurrection.

For a century and a half there has been an insidious idea adrift among the nations. Social Darwinism is the respectable academic name for it: for the good of the whole, some are expendable. There is no such thing as intrinsic worth.
According to Marilynne Robinson, in a fine book called *The Death of Adam,* Social Darwinism shaped thinking in the highest echelons of states that in this century have simply concluded that major populations needed to be eliminated for the good of the whole.The Soviet Union under Stalin, China, Cambodia, Nazi Germany, and now Yugoslavia. That's what is going on in Kosovo. Once again a nation state has decided that part of its population is expendable—a part defined by ethnicity and religion.

It all sounds grimly familiar. And to that notion Christians and people of faith of all types and theologies and ecclesiologies need to say no. In the name of the risen Lord, we will not accommodate or accept that ever again.

And in the meantime, there is the collection for the saints.

"Low Sunday." "So what Sunday." "Therefore" Sunday.

Richard Lischer, Emory University professor, says the resurrection of Jesus Christ cannot ultimately be explained—just practiced—performed: not in a seminar or even a sermon but in people worshipping together, standing to sing "Lift High the Cross," praying and then rolling up their sleeves and practicing resurrection in their families, communities, institutions, by loving, serving, giving . . .and living, always in hope, not only for personal resurrection but for the ultimate victory of truth, goodness and grace and love in our lives and in our world.

My favorite resurrection vignette comes from the late E.B. White. He wrote an essay about his wife who had died a few years earlier. She loved to garden: every year planned carefully, ordered from seed catalogues, created a new diagram for each year's planting. After she became ill, and nearly an invalid, she continued and managed somehow to get herself outside when it was time to plant.

White wrote:

> **"Armed with a diagram and clipboard, Catherine would get into a shabby old raincoat, much too long for her, and put on a little round wool hat and proceed to the director's chair placed at the edge of the plot. There she would sit, hour after hour, with the wind and the weather, while Henry Allen produced dozens of paper packages of new bulbs and a basket full of old ones, ready for the intricate interment. There was something comical, yet touching in her bedraggled appearance on this awesome occasion. The small, hunched-over figure: her studied absorption in the implausible notion that there would be another spring: oblivious to the ending of her own days, which she knew perfectly well was near at hand; sitting there with her chart under those dark skies in the dying October calmly plotting the resurrection." (*E.B. White: A Biography,* 1984 p. 353)**

O death, where is your victory?
O death, where is your sting?

Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved . . .Amen.